

Conversion

In the midst of all the Super Bowl hype last weekend I ran into a story about a young man named Chris Borland. Chris was on his way to a dream career in the NFL with 107 tackles in his rookie year with the San Francisco 49ers in 2014. Chris was going to be a star.

But his first season playing pro football would be his last.

Chris retired at age 24. “What am I doing?” he said to himself; “Is this how I’m going to live my adult life? ...banging my head, especially with what I’ve learned and know about the dangers?”

Chris saw how repeated concussions have left thousands of former players wracked with debilitating headaches anger and confusion and the early onset of dementia. Despite the success of his rookie year, Chris was unwilling to play another season because he was concerned that it would become a trap: he would continue risking injury in pursuit of a paycheck. He didn’t want to risk not being able to play with his kids someday.

Chris’ decision to walk away from football has won the admiration of parents of hundreds of thousands of youngsters eager to play each year at the youth, high school and college levels. But Chris is not without his critics – especially the NFL. The League points to the new protocols it has put in place for players who suffer concussions during games. Others deride Chris as “soft;” and accuse him of trying to “ruin our national game.”

Chris willingly returned most of his signing bonus to the 49ers. He said:

“That was the biggest surprise for me. People can’t get over the money.
That’s all they think about, but your health is a little more important.”

Chris turned down a role in the new movie Concussion and several endorsement opportunities: “I don’t want to monetize head injury in football. I think that attacks your legitimacy.” Chris has offered himself as a subject for concussion research.

Because of his courageous decision to walk away from fame and fortune in the NFL, ESPN calls Chris Borland “The most dangerous man in football”!

Now I don’t have a clue of Chris Borland’s religion, but I find Chris Borland story so powerful because, at 24 years old he was able to let go of the superficial, yet amazingly powerful, temptations of money, popularity, power, fame – *everything our culture tells us will make us happy* – in order to embrace what is *really meaningful* in life, the *deeper things* in life that money cannot buy.

And, brothers and sisters, that is exactly what today’s Gospel is all about!

After being baptized by John and before beginning his public ministry, Jesus goes to the desert for a long retreat. To the desert because, the people in Jesus' time saw the desert as a place where one encountered the 'Holy.' So Jesus embarks on his wilderness retreat – a time marked by intense prayer and fasting – to help him focus totally on God and God's will for him. In the midst of his retreat, Jesus is tempted... to use money, bread, unbridled power, fame and prestige to accomplish his mission of birthing the reign of God on earth...

... the same temptations that young Chris Borland ultimately rejected.

Both concluded that all the money, power, and prestige in the world will not bring us what is really important in life. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus goes on to Galilee to begin his public ministry.

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Sisters and brothers, the same Spirit that led Jesus into the desert, the same Spirit that enabled young Chris Borland to begin questioning what is really important in life, *is inviting us* as Disciples into the 40 day wilderness experience of Lent. The Spirit invites us to ask the same kind of questions, to understand – in a deeper way – who we really are and who we are becoming. Lent calls us into the desert of our hearts, where God speaks to us of what is truly right and good in our life and what we might need to let go of in order to become authentically our true selves, who God created us to be.

And this “spring-cleaning of our hearts” requires conversion. What is conversion? The theologian Bernard Lonergan describes conversion as a “fundamental shift in one’s paradigm of understanding, interpreting and acting upon reality.” Conversion entails taking on an entirely new vision. Using the metaphor of sight, Lonergan says of a conversion experience:

“It is as if one’s eyes were open and one’s former world faded and fell away, so that what hitherto was unnoticed becomes vivid and present... and what had been of no concern becomes a matter of high importance.”

Conversion implies a radical transformation of our relationship with self, others, and God.

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Think of Chris Borland’s story: from the time he was young boy his entire life was focused on perfecting his football skills, on the prize of an NFL career. But the power of conversion opened his eyes to a new reality; a turning away from superficial temptations toward a vision, a realization, of what is truly healthy.

Radical conversion is a Paschal – death and resurrection – experience, which entails dying to the false sense of self..., to our old selves; so as to rise to a new identity and understanding that is God-given. Sisters and brothers, this is not a ‘pie in the sky’ fantasy, but involves getting to the core of our lives, getting to the stuff that really makes us tick.

A powerful example of conversion is the journey of an addict – of alcohol, drugs, food, sex, work, whatever... (think about the current heroin situation in our community), who literally dies to one way of life in order to rise into a sober way of life — a day at a time, with the grace of a Power-Greater-than-Self, daily letting go and letting God.

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Lent is an opportunity to go into the desert and to listen to God with the ear of our hearts, to get in touch with what needs changing in our lives and relationships and families; communities, nation, and global society before it is too late.

The spiritual Giants give us some tools to use in our 40 day retreat:

- 1) Taking time for prayer and reflection. However you pray: Scripture reading, the Rosary, daily Mass, getting up 10 minutes early to light a candle in the dark, taking a walk.... Prayer is a declaration of independence from our frantic lives.
- 2) Fasting and abstinence. Though some of us may have grown up in an era where the rules of fasting and abstinence became an end in themselves and made the whole exercise seem beside the point, generously denying ourselves as a means to develop a consciousness and appreciation for all God's creation is a valuable, time-honored step to wholeness
- 3) Almsgiving. Letting go... getting out of our selfish selves by helping others is another universally recommended tool to get in touch with what is truly necessary in our own lives.

This year at All Saints, our Lenten journey will include joining with many parishes across our nation in responding to the call of Pope Francis to “care for our common home: Mother Earth” because, as we well know, if there is not a radical conversion in how humans relate to our earth and all life on our planet, as our Fr. Andy says: we will continue on “the road of blind self-destruction.”

Each week we will learn about the significant issues facing our human family, what Pope Francis and our Church is saying about them and how we – right here at all Saints – can make a difference.

As we began the week of Ash Wednesday, each weekend throughout Lent there will be a new Bulletin insert that will take us step-by-step through this seven-week program. We are invited to read and reflect on this material each week and then discuss the contents with our family and friends or to join one of our Lenten Small Reflection Groups that meet at various times throughout the week. It's not too late to join to sign-up on one of the sheets in the back of church.

A unique component of this program is that it uses those ancient spiritual tools of prayer, fasting and almsgiving as a means to aid us in the ultimate goal of Lent: *metanoia* – conversion of heart – leading us as individuals and our all Saints Community into a deeper Baptismal commitment to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, by living in harmony with God, Creation and our entire human family.

The spiritual tools of prayer, fasting, abstinence and almsgiving are needed to break through denial that keeps us enslaved and absolutely incapable of moving from one way of thinking to another, shifting – as Lonergan says: “from one paradigm to another,” from denial to reality. The destructive impact of denial is so clear: the denial of the drug-addict...; the denial of some persons – even in the face of all the empirical evidence – of climate change...; the denial – again in the face of empirical data – of the danger of head injuries by a nation addicted to professional football.... (One can only hope that there will come a time in the future when we look back with disbelief on our support of such a “primitive,” “barbaric” and destructive activity!)

We often hear the complaint – and rightly so – that the Church “is out of touch and irrelevant” and “it doesn’t mean anything to me...”. Sisters and brothers, I don’t think there could be a more relevant topic for our individual lives and for the future of our civilization, than the contents of the seven-week program: “Caring for our Common Home, Mother Earth.”

As we begin our Lenten Retreat, let us pray for one another:

O God, lead us this Lent into the deserts of our hearts,
let these days be a time of discernment and discovery;
resolution and conversion for each of us.

May your Word – your voice – your message
be our bread during our wilderness journey:
as we journey to Easter,
through Christ our Light.

Amen